



UFCW starts new organizing drive at Wal-Mart

By Mark Gruenberg

3 May 2009

WASHINGTON - After a five-year break to take stock and launch a consumer revolt against the giant retailer Wal-Mart, the United Food and Commercial Workers is starting a new organizing drive at the notoriously anti-union company.

The union is emboldened by several factors. One is its recent win in Canada, where provincial labor laws forced Wal-Mart to accept an arbitrator's 2-year contract settlement in the Wal-Mart store in Ste. Hyacinthe, Quebec. Similar cases are pending elsewhere north of the border.

Another is the election of Democrat Barack Obama to the White House, with strong labor support and over strenuous Wal-Mart opposition. The firm even went so far as to order its managers to warn workers to vote against Obama or suffer dire consequences if Obama won.

Organizing Wal-Mart is important for several reasons. It is the largest private company in the U.S., with more than 1 million workers, whom it calls "associates." Its economic power is such that it can dictate terms to its suppliers, forcing them to sell its goods at such low prices they have to cut their workers' wages.

And Wal-Mart's unionized competitors have cited the threat of the monster in arguing for their own wage and benefit cuts. The combination of those impacts has helped hold U.S. average wages to points lower than they would be otherwise.

Key issues in UFCW's organizing drive are Wal-Mart's always-low wages, medical benefits that cost so much and cover so little that half the company's workers and their families qualify for Medicaid, forced unpaid overtime, and few other benefits.

But with labor laws being much more pro-business in the U.S. than in Canada, UFCW augmented its new organizing drive with congressional briefings on April 30 for lawmakers about how Wal-Mart, like other companies, breaks labor law and abuses workers -- and the need for passage of the Employee Free Choice Act.

That act, labor's No. 1 legislative priority -- vehemently opposed by Wal-Mart -- would help level the playing field between workers and bosses in organizing drives and bargaining over first contracts, more than 100 Wal-Mart workers told congressional aides.

As an example, they used one of the most-notorious Wal-Mart cases in the U.S., where UFCW organized the firm's meat-cutting department in a store in Texas. Wal-Mart retaliated by shutting all its meat-cutting departments nationwide. It took almost nine years and several court orders, but the National Labor Relations Board's ruling for the meat-cutters was upheld. Bargaining began this year, with more Wal-Mart stalling.

The pro-UFCW workers in D.C., calling themselves Wal-Mart Workers for Change, also detailed, in stories to congressional staffers and in a new video, both working conditions at the monster retailer and its often-illegal tactics against union supporters. The D.C. trip by workers from 17 states followed UFCW's decision to send more than 60 organizers to 15 states to begin its new campaign.

In the film, Cynthia Murray, a Wal-Mart associate from Maryland, said the workers are "intimidated, and they are afraid. My family and other families have paid the price for freedom. And when you tell me I can't talk about a union, you're taking my freedom from me."

"Wal-Mart's slogan is 'Save Money, Live Better,'" Vikki Gill, a former Wal-Mart manager in St. Louis, said in the film. "Wal-Mart is saving money and living better at the associates' expense." The film and the workers also point out that Wal-Mart made \$13.4 billion in profits last year.

The other workers came to D.C. from Wal-Mart's home state of Arkansas, plus Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin.

Wal-Mart itself, trying to counter all the negative data, says in print ads that it created 30,000 new jobs last year, even as other companies fired workers and shed jobs. It also claims to "provide health care to every one of our new hires and their families." It doesn't say how much its health care costs or covers.

Other Wal-Mart workers detailed company threats to close a store in Dallas if workers vote for UFCW, interrogation by a company manager in Miami about which workers support the union, and four mandatory anti-union, anti-Employee Free Choice Act meetings in one week in the store in Glendale, Ill. The meetings are legal under labor law. The threat and the interrogation are not. Linda Haluska, an overnight stocker in Glendale, called Wal-Mart "a good place to work, but it would be better with a union."

Wal-Mart workers who are trying to organize the monster also cite support from Obama, and said his election last year empowered them to start the unionizing drive. Their pamphlets quote a 2007 Obama speech in Chicago, before he became president, where he told UFCW activists: "'I don't mind standing up for workers and letting Wal-Mart know they need to pay a decent wage and let folks organize.'"

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